

Prerequisites for civic engagement at Croatian universities

Abstract

The theoretical part analyzes the role and mission of universities to develop society from medieval European universities to contemporary ones. Special attention was given to defining the concept of university civic mission, taking into consideration the current debates in social sciences on the crisis of higher education and strengthening the corporate university mission. With the overview of the theoretical debates and (international) empirical research, relevant approaches to university mission are identified as well as the focal points of current and further research on the need to redefine the traditional roles of basic university activities.

The reasons for encouraging university civic mission are discussed, while the international initiatives developed in the academic community in the last decade which successfully shape the concept of university, which encourages civic engagement, are shown in detail. By giving an overview of the strategic guidelines, which encourage stronger integration of university civic mission, it is established that the guidelines are concerned with two basic levels: public educational policy level and institutional level.

On the institutional level there are those initiatives, which encourage the integration of university civic mission aspects in the basic academic activities with the purpose of educating socially responsible and active citizens, promoting civic engagement of the academic community, steering and facilitating active participation of citizens in the community.

Furthermore, the inadequacy of current models of university teaching staff criteria for advancement is explained because it, with its requirements, does not evaluate civic engagement of university teaching staff. Recognizing international initiatives which successfully shape the concept of university which encourages civic engagement of its members through an array of mechanisms, is of special interest for the national context in which the phenomenon of university (civic) mission is still an under researched issue.

The analysis of international initiatives is important for the categorisation of initiatives with the purpose of argumentation of the need for a stronger integration of university civic mission in its basic activities.

The empirical research examines the prerequisites for implementing university civic mission in Croatia, tries to establish challenges and develop a projection of the civic mission at Croatian universities. The document study analysed relevant legislative and strategic documents, which regulate and explain higher education in Croatia. The 79 documents were analysed with the purpose of determining the presence of developed indicators of university civic mission – contributing to community development, encouraging active citizenship and developing social responsibility.

The results obtained demonstrate the existence of favourable legislative circumstances for the development of civic mission at Croatian universities in the Law on Higher Education, but also an unfavourable status of university civic mission in university statutes and their faculties as well as in the criteria for advancement of university teaching staff. The role of universities, the responsibility of university teaching staff (in the context of promoting university civic mission, educating socially responsible and active citizens), and especially the challenges of integrating the university civic mission, are analysed through interviews conducted with the rectors of universities in Croatia.

The analysis shows that rectors are only partly acquainted with the concept of university civic mission and that Croatian universities face a big challenge, first of all, in understanding the concept of university civic mission. While the international initiatives strongly encourage university civic mission, especially the aspect of civic engagement of the representatives of the academic community through their basic activities, the analysis of rectors' standpoints reveals how teaching, research and community service are not, in the national context, recognised as mechanism for integrating aspects of university civic mission. The institutionalisation of civic mission is a recognised mechanism, primarily through strategic documents, representing the biggest challenge – evaluating civic engagement.

As long as Croatian universities, at least on the institutional level, fail to tackle the public and democratic purpose of education, encourage civic engagement of their members, especially students, fail to cooperate with the community and promote the public dimension of their work, it is not realistic to believe that university teaching staff will engage in similar activities or even promote community engagement, active participation and social responsibility.